

THE

CAUSE AND CURE OF ABJECT POVERTY:

A SERMON

ON 2 THESSALONIANS, 3. 10,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

STEW PONEY BECHER CLUB,

AT KINFARE CHURCH, WHIT-TUESDAY, 1847.

BY THE

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RECTOR OF KINGSWINFORD, STAFFORDSHIRE.

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TO
THE OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE STEWPONEY
BECHER CLUB.

Having been requested by our excellent President, Mr. Foley, of Pinst-wood, in this parish, to preach the Annual Sermon of our Society, I now offer my discourse in print to your acceptance, in the hope that it may thus more permanently help to encourage your zeal in behalf of an Institution in whose prosperity I feel a deep interest. The principles of our Friendly Society, devised by the Clergyman whose name it bears, and who is still living in the fulness of years to see the fruit of his wisdom and benevolence, are above all comparison with the system of those insolent clubs, which serve chiefly for decoys to the public house and beer shop. Without, therefore, dwelling on any such contrast, I felt it better to bring before you a question of universal interest; and I hope that I shall have made it evident from Scripture, that the general enjoyment of a competency, including leisure for the improvement of the faculties, mental and spiritual, is most fully in accordance with the will of God, in Christ Jesus, concerning every one who is called by his name. Were it not for the idleness, excess, and waste pervading all classes of society, this state of things might be largely realized; the wants of nature might be well satisfied in all, and the legitimate requirements of a refined taste supplied to many more than now enjoy them, without imposing on any more than half of the irksome toil which now falls to the lot of most. So abundant are the gifts of God's providence! So productive is the skill and enterprise of man. So ruinous are the effects of selfishness and vice! So sure is the prosperous issue of obedience to the laws of the Most High!

C. G.

Kingswinford Rectory, at Wordsley, 1847.

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A
S E R M O N,
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THE CAUSE AND CURE OF ABJECT POVERTY.

2 THESS. 3. 10.

“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any man would not work, neither should he eat.”

WHEN Moses exhorts the Israelites to be bountiful in almsgiving, he declares that “the poor shall never cease out of the land¹.” And our blessed Lord in like manner remarked to his disciples, “Ye have the poor always with you².” Hence some have too hastily concluded, that the state of abject poverty in which so many thousands around us live and die, and from which it is the object of our Association to rescue and secure its members,—I say, some have concluded that such a state of abject poverty is according to the will of that gracious God who “fillesh all things living with plenteousness³.” Now whatever be the purport of the passage I have referred to in the Old Testament, which concerned only the land of Israel, it is evident that the words spoken by our blessed Lord, go no further than to state the fact as it was, and as unhappily it still is, without in the least pronouncing what it ought to be. Neither here nor elsewhere does it appear written, that poverty, such poverty as makes one man wholly dependent on another, is any ordi-

¹ Deut. 15. 11.

² Matt. 26. 11.

³ Ps. 145. 16.

nance of the Gospel. On the contrary, whilst we find many and most stirring exhortations to the rich, that they should give largely to the poor, we find also principles laid down, which, if generally followed, would diffuse plenty amongst all. And, in direct contradiction to the notion that it is well for the poor to be dependent upon almsgiving, we find it positively enacted in the text, that "if any man would not work, neither should he eat."

But let me tell you what I mean by abject poverty. It is when a man has no home that he can call his own, when it is wholly out of his power to possess a house, or cottage, or garden, or to feel secure that he shall be able to pay the hire of such as he might wish to rent; when he has not so much as a week's wages beforehand, but is rather apt to be in debt for rent, food, and clothing, even when in health, and is sure to be dependent on credit, or on alms, if sickness should come and hinder him from working; it is when his wife and children are felt by him as a burden, instead of as a blessing, he being unable to maintain them as he ought; it is when he spends the prime of his years in this hopeless dependent state, with no prospect but of yet more hopeless dependency in the period of old age. I wish to draw no exaggerated picture. I believe that I have been describing correctly the condition of by far the greater part of the people in this nation of ours, so abounding in wealth, so enlightened in knowledge, so privileged in religious advantages. And I wish to prove that this is a state of things which the Gospel of Jesus Christ, instead of sanctioning, condemns; and which, in proportion as that Gospel is generally acted upon, it tends to banish from the earth.

Even under the law of Moses there was at least one ordinance inconsistent with the prevalence of such poverty, I mean the allotment of a piece of land to every man. There was, for every family, site for a home, a scope for industry, and a germ of independency. And lest one generation should suffer for the

faults of another, it was provided that this land should not be sold for ever; that is to say, in case any one were driven to sell his inheritance, by reason of idleness or wastefulness, it reverted to his family at the next year of jubilee. Much more under the Gospel, that law of love and liberty, which pronounces us all brethren in Christ Jesus, we may surely reckon to find principles securing plenty and peaceable enjoyment of the fruits of honest industry unto every man. Whilst we have no such minute regulations as were revealed from heaven to the Jews, for the distribution of land or property, we have instead thereof broad principles of universal application; and the heart in which Christ really reigns from his unseen throne in heaven, feels abundantly constrained, O the joys of this constraint, to carry out these principles in every thing!

To some few of these great principles, laid down by the Gospel for the guidance of our conduct, I would now fain draw your attention; principles inconsistent with the notion that the prevalence of abject poverty is according to God's will in the Gospel, or is a matter of indifference, and not rather an evil greatly to be deplored, and diligently to be remedied. First I would ask you just to contemplate for a moment in your minds, the outward universe, so orderly, so beautiful, so richly replenished and adorned; the fields decked with flowers as well as laden with fruits, the heavens glittering with countless stars. Remember how these things are spoken of in Scripture. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow¹;" and can you doubt that much more would God have man, the noblest of his creatures here below, fed, clothed, and lodged in comfort, to his own satisfaction, and to the glory of his Maker? Next, reflect what serious obstacles are presented by such poverty as I speak of, to the growth of almost every Christian grace. Let us leave the fields and flowers, the fresh air and pleasant

¹ Matt. 6. 28.

skies, and let us enter some close tenement, some narrow lodging, perhaps a single chamber for a whole family, dark, dirty, noisome, pestilential, the occupiers in rags, and faint for want of food. I stay not to observe that the bird fares better in its nest, the bee in its hive; instead of contrasting mankind with the brute creation, I ask you to contrast this picture with the portrait of a Christian as set before you in God's word. I ask you whether the beauties of the Christian character are likely to flourish in such an atmosphere as this? Will a man take no thought for the morrow, who has no means of making provision for to-morrow's meal? Is cheerfulness or joyfulness easy of attainment under the pressure of cold and hunger? Can modesty bloom where common decency is impracticable? Under the boundless power of God's grace, exceptions may occur, and marvellous instances undoubtedly there are of a holy life, and of a heavenly frame of mind, maintained in circumstances the most adverse; but still such exceptions are extremely rare; such circumstances are most adverse. And their ordinary influence on the mind, in debarring access to the preaching of the Gospel, may be justly represented by the following reply, made to one who was offering religious counsel, "True, Sir, but if you were as cold and hungry as I am, you could think of nothing else⁵." So that, on this ground alone, we might maintain, that the prevalence of abject poverty is the reverse of God's will in the Gospel.

Next let me ask, what is more opposed to that will expressly declared, than covetousness? What more than selfishness? What is more contradictory to the precepts and example of Him who went about doing good? What more contradictory than for a man to heap up riches to himself, and to grudge their possession by others, and to study how most exclusively to enjoy all that wealth can purchase, instead of spend-

⁵ See "Guthrie's Plea for Ragged Schools," p. 13.

ing riches, time, yea, and his very self also, in bettering the condition of all within his reach? Surely this eager grasping of so much by the few is one cause of there being so little left for the many, and is most opposite to the principles of action set before us by our blessed Lord. Whereas never, on the other hand, is man more like unto his Maker, never is the redeemed more conformed to the image of his Redeemer, than when intent on doing good, employed in diffusing happiness, diligent in forwarding an universal brotherhood amongst mankind, not by pulling down the eminent, but by raising up the depressed, and by studying to make every man a partaker of the utmost possible degree of light and refinement, of knowledge, taste, and enjoyment, according to the true standard of those elements of happiness set before us in God's word. The ten talents do indeed there yield other ten talents, and the eye of the needle proves not too narrow for a pathway to the camel, when the rich man, instead of trusting in his riches, instead of seeking to confine to himself the enjoyments which riches purchase, makes it his business, his happiness, to communicate them as effectually as he can to all who dwell around him. And if this be the rich man's duty, privilege, glory, in the Gospel, can it be the will of Christ that the poor should never cease out of the land?

II. But what are the poor themselves to be doing all the while? How do they for the most part come to poverty? How may they most effectually emerge from its bondage, and escape from the temptations to sin, and from the obstacles to godliness, which abound in its lowest depths? And how may the bounty of the rich, and the intelligence of the prudent, and the benevolence of the charitable, be best combined and brought to bear upon the necessities of the poor, consistently with the principle laid down in the text, that "if any man would not labour, neither should he eat?" By way of reply to these questions, I observe, that the poor are, for the most part, answerable for their own

abject poverty, and that nothing can effectually help them without their earnestly endeavouring to help themselves. Did you ever hear how much is spent during a year by the labouring classes of these realms, in such articles as gin, strong beer, and tobacco? Think of so many millions of money wasted in poisonous self-indulgence; and, remember, Wastefulness is sure to bring to want. Oh, just consider how many days and hours in a year many working men devote to idle play, either sitting all the while at public houses, or sauntering in the lanes, or sitting listless on the threshold of their doors; cast up this precious time so grievously misspent: and, mark me, Idleness is sure to bring to want. But drink is worse than wasteful, it leads to drunkenness. And therefore consider, further, how many a good workman loses character, as well as time; loses health as well as time and character; loses health, character, time, money, all, this world and the next; loses all by drunkenness. vile, hateful, brutish drunkenness. Consider this, I say, and once more observe me, Drunkenness is sure to bring to want. Drunkenness, Idleness, Wastefulness: how frequently to be met with all around us. No wonder then that we have the poor always with us. But ought we to have them through these means? Is this the will of Him who gave his blessed Son to be our Saviour? Or has not He charged us to be not slothful in business; commanded us to be temperate in all things; and taught us, instead of wastefulness, to gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost? Shew me a man that is at once frugal, sober, and industrious, and I will answer for it he is not steeped in poverty. Shew me a whole population living as God has taught us in the Gospel, working diligently, eating and drinking temperately, and providing for the future reasonably; and then I will shew you, by the absence of abject poverty, that the principles of the Gospel have provided that the poor shall cease out of the land.

But no such population can be met with. No such

community has yet existed on the face of the earth ; no nation or people, universally, or even generally influenced in these weighty points of conduct by the truth revealed from heaven in the Bible ; and therefore we have the poor as yet always with us. And the question of bettering their condition becomes daily of deeper and deeper importance to all classes of society. What then are the practical conclusions in this matter to which the thoughts I have laid before you are designed to lead ?

First, The poor must help themselves ; for if any man would not work, neither should he eat. Secondly, The efforts of the benevolent must be directed to two distinct objects ; the one to teach the poor to help themselves, by throwing them on their own resources, and raising them to a position of independence through means of their own industry, frugality, and temperance ; the other, to give them help during the process, help in working up their way from penury, and help under the pressure of those contingencies for which, as long as they are poor, they make no provision. With a few remarks on these two points I hasten to conclude.

Let us take the latter point first. I say that as long as there is abject poverty there must be alms given to relieve it, such as food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, medicine to the sick, instruction to the ignorant. We admit the force of a common objection, that all such almsgiving tends to make the poor depend on it ; we are quite aware that they might very well maintain themselves, educate their children, and make ample provision for sickness and old age ; but, notwithstanding, as long as they do not, have not, will not, and, to a certain extent, cannot, we dare not let them perish for lack of help ; nay, we would by no means lose the blessed opportunity of imitating the grace and goodness of that God, whose mercifulness and bountifulness are not withheld even from those who are apt to presume upon them wrongfully. Urgent want must ever be a clear title to active relief in the

apprehension of a Christian. But whilst with one hand he seeks to mitigate to his suffering fellow creatures ills which are almost uniformly the consequences of their own ignorance or improvidence, idleness or intemperance, with the other hand he is at least as actively employed in cutting off the root of the evil, by encouraging and promoting, to the utmost of his power, those opposite qualities of conduct, which even reason points out as the way to independence, but whose general adoption can be secured by nothing else except a religious obedience to the will of God. Help then the poor must have from the rich ; help in their abject poverty, help in the way of direct almsgiving, help from the rich, and help also from each other, according to the emphatic words of the Apostle, who bids men labour with their hands that they may have to give to them that need. And help they must also have during the process of working their own way from poverty to a competence ; such help as materials for their industry, scope for their labour, security for their savings, and counsel for the right direction of their exertions. And these are exactly the end and object of such institutions as ours. The intelligence of the educated, and the riches of the wealthy, are with us directed to assist the labouring classes in securing a provision for themselves. And each shilling laid up in store for the future, by the ploughman, the peasant, or the mechanic, is laid up on the same security, and is calculated, and its returns adjusted, on the same principles, as those of the hundreds and thousands of pounds which the higher classes provide for their own families. Nothing but the ignorance and prejudices of those whose own interests are most deeply at stake ; nothing but such enticements as those of strong drink, which are usually at work in favour of other Friendly Societies, can prevent the general adoption of the principles of this which we belong to. And were these principles generally adopted, a great step would be gained in advance towards the ceasing of the poor out of the land.

Ignorance and prejudice must therefore be first rooted

out; that is to say, education must perform the work which it undertakes; and the love of strong drink, that bane and curse of our labouring population, which turns the best of food to poison, and degrades the noblest of God's creatures below the level of a brute, this love of strong drink must be supplanted by a taste for better things. Self restraint must take the place of self indulgence, sobriety of drunkenness; in other words, whilst education informs the mind, religion must control the heart. Let but true religion gain its hold, the true religion of the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and in proportion as it does so, in every man and in all, there is sure to be realized a scene of plenty and of peaceable enjoyment, of order, contentment, thankfulness, and love. And can we doubt that such a scene as here supposed would be pleasing to our Maker? Can we imagine that He prefers to see his reasonable creatures, that were made in his own image, intelligent, sensitive, and immortal spirits, bowed down by the toil and turmoil of helpless, hopeless poverty? Can we think that He would so much as suffer it to be so, were it not his purpose to move man to exertion by the sense of want? "If any man would not work, neither should he eat:" this is the Divine sentence, ordained for our good. And the intent of this sentence is to train us up in habits of industry, frugality, temperance, forethought, and so at once to render our life on earth cheerful, contented, happy, and to give us the habit of looking forward and providing for a life eternal in the heavens.

Yes, my brethren, be assured the like rule holds good here also; it is alike true of the bread of heaven, that if a man will not work, neither shall he eat thereof. When our blessed Lord had wrought a miracle to feed the hungry multitude, on each occasion He designed thereby to forward the spiritual good of his disciples. Had they "considered" his mighty work aright, they would have been replenished in soul as well as body⁶. Let us turn to our spiritual profit

⁶ See Mark 6. 52.

the reflections we have now been making on the means whereby God has ordained that the wants of the body should be usually supplied. Much depends upon mutual assistance, all depends on help from heaven; but nothing can avail without exertion in ourselves. As Christians, we are members of a great Friendly Society; and it is our pleasant privilege to help in bearing each other's burdens. As Christians, we acknowledge that every good gift, and more especially the gifts of grace, holiness, and heaven, must come down from our Father which is above. But as Christians we need also to be constantly aware, that unless we lay hold on these his gifts by faith, requite them with love, and give proof of the sincerity of our love by zeal and perseverance in our works, it is the sentence of a righteous Judge that will consign us to the place appointed for unprofitable servants.

If then ye have seen the wisdom of making due provision for this world's future, exercise the like forethought in providing for eternity. Count, in like manner, count the cost, and secure, with like prudence, secure the benefit. Nay, rather apply industry and skill, self restraint and mutual help, a thousandfold more heartily, more vigorously, more earnestly, in proportion as the riches of eternity transcend beyond all comparison this world's good things: these perishable, those eternal; these, at the best means of trial, pregnant with temptation, those pure, incorruptible, and incapable of corrupting, joys common to men with angels, pleasures at God's right hand for evermore.

THE END.